Interview with Joseph Cheevers

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

JOSEPH CHEEVERS

Interviewed by: William Morgan

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Q: This is an interview with Joseph Cheevers, who has spent his career, until recently when he retired, in the Foreign Service, largely as a consular officer. This interview is part of a project that we are doing on the consular function. Joe Cheevers and I first met each other in 1978 when I was assigned to Paris and he was chief of the visa section in Paris, so we know each other from four years together there.

Joe, for the purposes of this session, we'll only go back 20 years. I hate to make it sound as if you've been around longer than that.

We won't go back to Ethiopia or Nicaragua or Senegal, but we'll go back to 1967 and bring it up to date through your assignments in Rabat and Washington, Madrid, Paris, and then back to Paris. What we are particularly interested in is something that you're very good at, namely recounting stories, anecdotes, and realities of your job as an officer in these different assignments. Let's start off in Rabat, where you served between '67 and '70. What did you consider to be the highlights of your tour there?

CHEEVERS: There were a number of highlights. We had a relatively small American community in Rabat, and a small consular section with emphasis upon protection. It was the beginning of the drug culture: from the middle to the end of the 1960s. There was a

great increase in hashish smuggling and a number of Americans were being arrested in Morocco for things which now might be considered relatively minor, such as possession. Morocco, with its US bases at that time, and its relatively open attitude toward certain drugs, was a primary source of hash for the US military bases and for the American as well as the European market.

Q: So Morocco was a source of drugs?

CHEEVERS: Yes, it was. Not only a source with vast tracts of the Rif areas under hash cultivation, but it was also a point of transfer. You easily crossed the Straits of Gibraltar into Spain, which was a country very, very tough on drug offenders at that time.

Q: What kind of volume are we talking about?

CHEEVERS: At one particular time, I could tell you. I don't recall what the tonnage was but it was substantial.

Q: No, in terms of people. How many were arrested?

CHEEVERS: I think we had at one time about 35 people in jail in various stages of judicial process.

Q: What did you do for them?

CHEEVERS: We did what I think good consular officers do, immediately let them know that our government does have an interest and endeavor to extend protection to them.

Q: Did they believe you?

CHEEVERS: Nine times out of ten, we were dealing with people far more sophisticated than we were, in the sense that they had been trafficking for some time and they were not interested in anything except getting out of jail. “If you can't get me out, go away,” was

not an uncommon attitude, although many softened considerably after a few weeks in a Moroccan jail.

Q: So they were professional smugglers?

CHEEVERS: I wouldn't say professional or in the same league as the Medellin Cartel, but in the sense that they had experience. There were others, of course, a teacher from New York and one from Ohio, who were in for the bucks and knew they could make a whole lot of money fast working as carriers or “mules.” The big time smuggler was a rarity in Morocco, as I recall.

Q: Some you looked at as innocent, and some as guilty?

CHEEVERS: Yes, you found yourself making judgments, although you were very careful not to impart that to anybody, who had anything to do with the arrest, incarceration, or trial, to say, “I know this guy is guilty,” although on several occasions I raised key questions with local attorneys on behalf of a number of our arrested countrymen whom I thought were poorly represented.

Q: Can you give me an example of how you kept your balance on this?

CHEEVERS: I recall it wasn't easy. It was hard to remain dispassionate. One had to separate the crime from the individual, and treat all of them the same: fairly and humanely.

Q: Did you have any pressure to go one way or the other?

CHEEVERS: Oh, sure. I remember a particularly sensitive case of an 18 year old, who was the daughter of a well known official in the administration. She was arrested in Tangier for trafficking. She had run away from her parents who were on an official trip, in Europe at the time. She and her boyfriend, another 18 year old, decided to skip and go to Morocco for a good time. On the way back to Europe, she filled her suitcase with hashish. She was picked up in Tangier in route to Algeciras. That was the beginning of

the Nixon Administration's war on drugs. For the first time middle-class American kids were being arrested left and right. Jails in places like Mexico and Spain, were full of young Americans. It became a very important issue, as I recall, with the Administration calling upon our foreign friends to crack down, and cooperate to stem the flow of drugs into the US

I remember going to the DCM and saying, “This is really, really sensitive stuff.”

The consul in Tangier who had reported the arrest said that the governor of the province had reminded us that Morocco had taken the US request for cooperation very seriously, and that the young woman had violated Moroccan Law.

Q: Were they tougher on Americans? Do you think they maybe gave us a harder time because we were Americans?

CHEEVERS: No, I don't think so. I think however, that there was a certain amount of xenophobia. They were overly sensitive, and believed their judicial system might not be taken seriously by Westerners. Their judicial system appeared to be a combination of the French system and the Islamic “Shari'a” system. Odd, mysterious and much more vulnerable to tampering.

Q: Crooked?

CHEEVERS: Well, more open to fraud and to payoffs. Bear in mind also that while white Islamic culture prohibits alcohol, there is a great deal of tolerance for hash or kif. On one level they said, “Boys will be boys,” and dealing and using kif is tolerated, but on the other level it is, “Hey, we've got a foreigner here, and they're not only overdoing it but giving Morocco a poor name.”

In any event, a decision was made, in the arrest case, that we were going to intercede with Moroccan officials on behalf of this young lady because she was related to somebody in the administration. It didn't seem logical to me, under the circumstances.

Q: Who made the decision, the DCM?

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: Did the ambassador know what was going on?

CHEEVERS: The ambassador wasn't in the country at that time.

Q: So he was charg#.

CHEEVERS: He was charg# d'affaires at the time. He was, a superb officer whom I respected enormously, but he made a decision which I thought was flawed decision.

Q: How did you try and talk him out of it?

CHEEVERS: In retrospect I probably could have been more persuasive. But I thought it was obvious to all that if you went to the Moroccans to ask for their cooperation in connection with the drug trade, and reminded them of our mutual interests and had obtained their commitment that was sufficient in getting our interests across. You could hardly them “Oh, by the way you've got one of our guys, you're going to have to make an exception.”

Q: These are political arguments, aren't they?

CHEEVERS: Yes, they are.

Q: And the DCM did not understand them?

CHEEVERS: That is a hard one to answer. He was feeling confident on how to handle the matter locally, but probably didn't realize that an act designated to help an American might not be viewed quite so positively in the light of a policy which was supposed to be across the board.

Q: So he was more worried about his reputation back home?

CHEEVERS: No, I think he was motivated by the idea of helping one of our own. The issue here was not helping one of us as I saw it. But I could not say this; I was too junior.

Q: Why couldn't you say it?

CHEEVERS: Well . . .

Q: Weren't you professionally convinced you were right?

CHEEVERS: Yes, I was professionally convinced but in my recollection of the event, probably said something less than professional like: “I am uncomfortable with this, but I am going along with it simply because you have asked me to go along with it.” I'm talking here about the realities of the Foreign Service. I could not pound the desk and say, “Your judgment is flawed, sir, and I can't work for you.” On the other hand I was also probably swayed by thoughts of an American girl, never mind the charges, languishing in a Moroccan prison. Not a pleasant thought.

Q: But now that you're older and wiser and more experienced, what would you have done in retrospect?

CHEEVERS: I like to think I would have cooly walked him through the matter of our confusing and contradicting request to the Moroccan authorities, and remind him how tough it could be to explain our action had it made the front page of the Washington Post.

Q: But you didn't do that?

CHEEVERS: No. It was hardly my finest hour. Part of it was intimidation, part of it was limited experience, and part of it was “Can we get away with it?” gambling was part of it. One asks: “Will it work?” Well, it did work! It worked, but from an ethical standpoint, it was something hard to digest.The premise was that we were going to help this person because she was very young, very foolish and the daughter of an official, “one of us” or some words to that effect. I was instructed to get on the line and talk to the Consular officer in Tangier, and tell him to talk to the chief of police in Tangier to ask him to do what he could to help. This girl was out of jail in about 48 hours.

Q: Then the message that you would give to young officers today is the DCM was right, he got her out of jail.

CHEEVERS: Yes, but with caveats! The effort was successful, an American was freed from a foreign jail. But look at the risks taken. I don't think this would be done today!

Q: And you were wrong.

CHEEVERS: Yeah, if the only criterion for success in arrest cases is to obtain release. However, when I got back to Washington, I found out that CA (Consular Affairs) had heard about it. It had gotten all the way to Barbara Watson, who was then the Director of Security and Consular Affairs. She had not yet become the Assistant Secretary. And she was fuming.

Q: So you made a mistake, not only to yourself, but to the system.

CHEEVERS: Yes. I never discussed the matter with her. I never had an opportunity, I should say.

Q: Advice to junior officers?

CHEEVERS: My advice to junior officers, today, is, “Hang tough” if you believe you are right. I realize that it can be difficult, but far less risky than 25 years ago.

Q: Do you think the junior officer today is stronger and more ale to stand up to those “evil bosses?”

CHEEVERS: Certainly they are more vocal about what disturbs them, and less intimidated by authority than we were 20 years ago, because authority is there to be challenged. In addition, there are elements in the system to permit dissent, such as the dissent channel and the grievance system.

Q: What about the relationship with the DCM. Were you the only consular officer?

CHEEVERS: Yes, supported by two FSOs.

Q: What was your relationship with the rest of the embassy, your colleagues?

CHEEVERS: It was an extremely good relationship. Rabat was a small embassy, with a lot of camaraderie. We had weathered the Moroccan reaction to the Six Day War. We were shaken, but the experience generated a closeness among the staff that was remarkable. Morale was high and remained so.

Q: Were you looked at as an equal?

CHEEVERS: No, I can't say I was, for a couple of reasons. The consular section was very small, and I did not have the rank. I was the second lowest ranking officer in the embassy, so I did an awful lot of odd chores simply because of that.

Q: Was it because you were consular officer also, or not?

CHEEVERS: Certainly there was some of that.

Q: What did you do to overcome that intimidation?

CHEEVERS: There was very little that I could do as far as educating the ambassador, or the DCM, if that's what you mean.

Q: Why was that?

CHEEVERS: Very simple. Because the ambassador, was uneducable in that he was above it all. The ambassador had his interests, and the Consular function was not one of them.

Q: Was there anybody in the embassy that could tell you how to get through to the ambassador?

CHEEVERS: There was a wonderful political officer, and he and I discussed the matter. I picked up a telephone shortly after this momentous decision was made and said, to him, “What am I going to do? Suppose this happens and that happens? How is this going to play in Washington? What do I do?”

Q: How's it going to play with yourself, with your own conscience?

CHEEVERS: Well, I wasn't so much worried about myself. My political officer friend said, “Look, you don't have much of a choice, because you know what's going to happen if you don't do this. He'll pick up the telephone himself. Then you're going to have a very hard time for the rest of your time here.” So I decided that I was going to play it that way.

Q: The efficiency report was out there, too?

CHEEVERS: Of course the efficiency report was out there. As we all know, this is the man who writes your efficiency report, and there are wonderful ways one can describe something like this as insubordination.

Q: You also had Casablanca and Tangier as constituent posts.

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: What role did you play? Did you supervise the consular function?

CHEEVERS: Rabat had no supervisory Consular role. The Consular officer in Tangier was experienced. The Officer in Casablanca however was not. And therefore provided me with an opportunity to share experiences and make suggestions.

Q: Could you speak with the authority of the embassy, though, when you talked to him?

CHEEVERS: As you very well know, when you're at an embassy, you're perceived as authoritative.

Q: You can try. (Laughs)

Q: Any other highlights from Rabat?

CHEEVERS: Only from the standpoint of how many medieval Islamic jails I visited while I was there, and some of the human touches, and some other things which were politically dynamite. We had a large group of American Fundamentalist missionaries who were proselytizing among Moroccan Moslems, particularly children. They had a Christian Orphanage near Mebanes, as I recall.

Q: In an Islamic country.

CHEEVERS: Yes. The Shari'a, an Islamic law in Morocco prohibited the conversion of Moslems. Moroccans were particularly sensitive to this, and acted quickly on the merest hint of religious activity involving their nationals.

Q: That sounds political to me.

CHEEVERS: Very political. The subject dominated many a staff meeting. This matter was largely a question for the political officers. However, it became my problem when they threatened to arrest or deport missionaries for proselytizing. In one particular case, they did arrest a missionary for Christianizing a child. The missionaries were well aware of the law, but apparently couldn't help themselves, committed as they were to Evangelizing. They were steadfast in the belief that things would change in North Africa and all over the Islamic world, and they wanted to get a toehold. Their constituency in the US was extremely vocal and demanding. You knew that if you didn't handle them carefully, the letters would flow in and pressure would come from the Department.

Q: Sounds to me like you were, as most consular officers are, exposed to an awful lot of the realities of the country. Were you able to feed back any of these insights to your colleagues in other sections, or did they want it?

CHEEVERS: There was not an awful lot of interest, to be honest with you.

Q: Why?

CHEEVERS: A lot of it had to do, I think, with the personalities involved. I had a very good relationship with the political officer, but beyond that, contacts were limited. I could divine that very easily as we went around the table in the mornings, at staff meetings. The consular function was not perceived as relevant.

Q: If you had it to do over, would you do it differently? You said you were quite junior and you were more vulnerable to intimidation when you were younger. But if you had it to do over?

CHEEVERS: Yes, I would do it differently! I would be much more vocal, I think. I have learned a few things.

Q: How?

CHEEVERS: I would say, “Wait a minute. Let's take a better look that.”

Q: Suffer the embarrassment?

CHEEVERS: Yes, you have to do that to grow.

Q: I think you're also a grandfather.

CHEEVERS: Yes! I'm a grandfather!

Q: Let's come back now to Washington. It looks to me from your background here, this is your first assignment in Washington. This is 1970 to '73, Chief of the Special Consular Services in the Bureau of Consular Affairs, in what was then called SCS, Special Consular Services. You have a distinguished title here of in charge of deaths and estates. Sounds horrible!

CHEEVERS: It was a terrible job.

Q: Tell us about it.

CHEEVERS: I was the death and estates officer in SCS.

Q: What does that mean?

CHEEVERS: It meant that any death of a US citizen abroad and any problem with estates for US citizens came through my office.

Q: How would you learn about the death of an American?

CHEEVERS: When a US citizen died abroad the Department was notified by cable from the post. We would get the facts out of the cable, and then notify the next of kin in the US by telegram.

Q: And you broke the news?

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: So all you did in those days was break bad news?

CHEEVERS: It was a very unpleasant job. In addition to the individual deaths were the air crashes and the losses at sea. I wonder now how I was able to cope with the daily tragedies, the constant calls from the grieved. We were their only link with the post, in the country where the death occurred, in those days of limited telephone service.

Q: Some being front-page stuff.

CHEEVERS: Very often. It was a hot seat, a very difficult and emotionally draining experience.

Q: You were alone?

CHEEVERS: I had one assistant, a secretarial assistant, who also helped me on the telephones.

Q: But you were the only officer?

CHEEVERS: I was the only officer.

Q: Of course, the minute the telegram was received by a parent or other relative, the telephone rang, because you put your telephone number in the telegram. Then what would you do?

CHEEVERS: You then had to deal with the individual on the other end of the telephone who was grief-stricken and not always coherent. Americans often died in relatively remote

places, so you needed to explain to grieving family members that there were additional problems, and often additional expenses, in say, getting remains off a mountain top.

Q: Because none of that was in the cable.

CHEEVERS: In those days, I'm talking about 1970, the notification cable was very short.

Q: Today that is now turned into a long cable with all of this information.

CHEEVERS: Absolutely. Now it is perhaps too long. I have seen the steady evolution of the death notification cable, and I understand that the present form is very comprehensive. Some even called the old form of notification callous because it mentioned money.

Q: But in your days, you had to give it all over the telephone?

CHEEVERS: The fill-in information, yes. Often it was information which was subsequently developed where an accidental death had occurred. We also had these depressing but necessary annual reports on the cost of embalming, the cost of cremation and that sort of thing. I remember one bizarre report from an African post stating that while regular cremation services were not available, the local fire department could, if necessary, make arrangements.

Q: Cheaper.

CHEEVERS: Can one believe that? Yes.

Q: This was extraordinarily depressing! For morning, noon, and night?

CHEEVERS: Pretty much.

Q: You just broke death news for three years!

CHEEVERS: I wasn't an easy person to live with. I worried a lot at night. And I learned there is no scorn like the scorn of a grieved person. I recall the terrible experience of a woman who lost an aunt, in an aircraft accident in Greece. I thought I had done everything possible for this person, yet for reasons unknown she turned on me with such terrible, vicious revenge, I simply could not understand it. It made me a much stronger person, if you want to say you can salvage anything from such an experience. I think the problem might have arisen because I was unable to furnish her with the arrival time in the US for the aircraft carrying her aunt's remains. I did not have the information when she called. She promptly complained to the Inspector General's office.

Q: Did he handle it collegially?

CHEEVERS: No, he did not. He sent me an accusatory letter.

Q: You were sent a letter?

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: He didn't even call you?

CHEEVERS: No, not at all. The letter started: “The Inspector General has received a complaint about how you . . .” and went on dismally from there. I was crushed.

Q: You're guilty before he even asked?

CHEEVERS: Yes, unfortunately.

Q: Why?

CHEEVERS: I think part of it was the Inspector General's practice at that time no one took time to investigate a complaint first. Some underling in IG answered the call with “Oh,

my goodness, no! He said that?" And then took the complaint to someone else who said, "Write him a letter. Make a record."

Q: Was there anybody that supported you?

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: Who was that?

CHEEVERS: The chief of what was the Office of Special Consular Services, Matt Ortwein. Matt Ortwein drafted a supporting responsive letter to the IG. It was the best thing I had ever seen, and vindicated me completely.

Q: He was your immediate boss?

CHEEVERS: Yes. If it were not for him I would have had a very, very poor opinion of how one's integrity is protected in the service. All of us in SCS working with the public were very vulnerable.

Q: Were there other bad experiences like this, where you felt the system was not protecting you?

CHEEVERS: No. I must say that that was the nadir. I don't recall anything else as important. Most of the time I was well supported.

Q: All the way to the top of the bureau?

CHEEVERS: Pretty much.

Q: So despite the sadness of the job you had, you left after two and a half years pleased with the experience professionally?

CHEEVERS: Yes, pleased professionally. I learned how the CA worked in relationship to posts overseas. I developed a number of important contacts within the Department which would prove helpful to me.

Q: How about the people in the bureau with you? What was your relationship with them?

CHEEVERS: Generally good, and in some cases excellent, although I thought then as I do now that it was “a mixed bag.”

Q: Could you explain this?

CHEEVERS: (Laughs) I can say that it was very mixed. Some colleagues were superb and dedicated professionals, and others were bureaucrats in the worst sense of that word.

Q: How?

CHEEVERS: At the time, the modus of the officer dealing with the posts was: “You are wrong. This is the way you're going to do it.” They led with a reprimand when they should have instructed.

Q: Was this civil service versus Foreign Service?

CHEEVERS: To a great degree. Imagine how a vice consul in Kathmandu might feel when he asked for help and received a rap on the knuckles. You could, and probably did, devastate young officers by in effect saying: “What's wrong with you? Why don't you look at the FAMS?”

Q: Could you change the methodology of people like that? Was there anything you could do at your level?

CHEEVERS: No permanent change at my level. But at the level of Matt Ortwein, very definitely. Unfortunately, it was a very busy office, and we had serious problems because we did not have enough staff.

A colleague of mine was doing arrests and protection worldwide and singlehandedly. I remember that the jails in Mexico and Turkey were beginning to fill up with young Americans. There were hearings on the Hill, lots of press coverage and Matt Ortwein was asked “How many officers do you have taking care of arrests?” And he said, “I have one officer.”

I forget which congressman this was, but he said, “You have 600 people around the world in jail, and you have only one officer? Why don't you have the officers you need? Have you ever asked for additional officers?”

I don't recall the answer. It did not make us look good.

Q: What you're saying, then, it was an outside force—in this case, Congress, as it often is—that got us to shake our act up?

CHEEVERS: Yes. Congress was doing its job at that particular time.

Q: Why weren't we, why do you think?

CHEEVERS: It's hard to understand that. First of all, I think it was a question of the shortness of assignments, which didn't allow enough time for a thorough assessment of needs, and of course the slowness of the personnel system to respond.

Q: But the leadership, Barbara Watson was the head then, was she?

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: What was her attitude towards this issue?

CHEEVERS: I can't tell you what her attitude was at that time, but she was successful in getting staffing levels raised in CA, because the bureau changed dramatically. Up to that time people were working long hours. I was working a lot of overtime.

Q: What about other elements within the Department? Was there nobody else? The inspection corps, for example?

CHEEVERS: I can't recall hearing anything from the Inspector General at the time. In the two and a half years I was there, there was no inspection of CA.

Q: Was there no manager of the Department, as far as CA was concerned? Was there anybody up there?

CHEEVERS: Barbara Watson.

Q: But above that. Was there the budget area?

CHEEVERS: I don't recall that the matter escalated to the Under Secretary for management. My opinion is that things were allowed to reach crisis levels before action was taken. If it got in the newspapers, somebody would then say, “We've got to take a look at this!”

Q: What I'm getting at is the same thing you had in Rabat. In other words, it's only when something really hits the fan that anyone focuses on it in the consular area, and then it becomes a negative image.

CHEEVERS: As an example, I can remember my conversation with an officer in SS, now highly placed, concerning a tragic aircraft accident in Moscow, in which very prominent US religious leaders lost their lives. I was handling this pretty much by myself with Bea Berman. He said, “There is very high level interest in this accident. I've been calling for an hour and I can't get into your office.”

“I've been on the phone.”

“Don't you have any other people?”

I said, “I'm it.”

He said, “I can't believe it. All of this is happening and you're it?”

CHEEVERS: He could not believe that I'd been juggling all those balls. So what conclusions can be drawn? Management could have been more responsive. I believe that at the time it was considered perfectly natural to stretch resources to the breaking point. Now CA response in Civil aviation crashes is immediate and task forces are quickly set up.

Q: This is about the time in which the consular function sort of came out of the closet, to use a phrase.

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: With the help of Congress, you're telling me.

CHEEVERS: Yes, largely! Constituents leaning on Congress and Congress leaning on us. Shortly after these hearings SCS was reorganized. A lot of needed resources were plowed into it. There were extraordinary changes which were changes for the better.

Q: How about the other parts of CA? Were they sympathetic to these changes?

CHEEVERS: I think so.

Q: Then you decided you had enough of Washington, and you took off for Madrid.

CHEEVERS: Yes. How did I get Madrid?

Q: How did you get Madrid? Tell us. Did you know somebody? (Laughs)

CHEEVERS: Yes, I knew somebody. (Laughs) The tale goes on, sir: I happened to be on the same ship returning to the US as the officer who was to be my career counselor. Career counselors are the guys, as you know, who orchestrate your assignments and allegedly plot your career. We struck up a wonderful friendship, I clearly had an inside line on the assignment process.

Q: Are you saying that assignments aren't made in a very dispassionate and impersonal way?

CHEEVERS: I am saying they're made that way, too, sometimes.(Smiling)

Q: Are you saying you brought influence to bear?

CHEEVERS: I'm saying that I certainly did. I brought everything but the kitchen sink.

Q: What would you advise contemporaries to do?

CHEEVERS: I can say that you'd better learn how the bureaucracy works, because it's in your interest. If you expect the system to take care of you entirely, then you will be a has-been very quickly.

Q: We'll pause long enough for that to sink in. (Laughs) Tell us, now that you perchance got this assignment to Spain, why did you want it, incidentally?

CHEEVERS: It was a very, very good job.

Q: Deputy Chief Consular Section. What does that mean?

CHEEVERS: It meant that I was deputy to the consul general, and the consul general was not a very well man, thus allowing me more opportunities to manage than would be generally available, because his many absences from the post for health reasons.

Q: So you really were kind of the consul general?

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: At a mid-rank.

CHEEVERS: Yes, I was an 02 at that time.

Q: Which is an 04 today.

CHEEVERS: Right. My counselor said to me, “Look, this is really the kind of job you want, because you'll have an opportunity to do everything.” I didn't realize until shortly after I got there what this really meant. I had a supervisor, who was a very fine man, but for a variety of reasons was managerially inert. The protection workload, incidentally, was higher. Higher than any of the other services, and very time-consuming.

Q: But he was not well?

CHEEVERS: Correct. But he also had a very, very relaxed attitude toward management.

Q: Do you have any advice to give on how you, maybe from your own examples, how you work in a situation like that, where you respect the boss, but . . . ?

CHEEVERS: One of the first things, some management sage said to me was, “Learn to manage your boss.”

Q: I think I said that to you in Paris, didn't I? Right.

CHEEVERS: I think you did. That stuck with me these many years. Yes, if there ever was a truism, that is learn to manage your boss. I knew what his strengths were, and I certainly knew what his weaknesses were. I must say that I am grateful to him for having given me the opportunity. There's no ill will here.

Q: Did he let you pretty much . . . ?

CHEEVERS: No doubt about it except attend Consular Conferences, when he was always well enough to attend.

Q: How did the rest of the embassy look at you as a substitute consul general?

CHEEVERS: They looked at me sympathetically and as a pillar of the consular section, because they knew that the Consul General was very unwell, hanging on to his post desperately, but not ill enough to surrender the perks that went along with being consul general. He was not pulling his weight. For example, I, as the deputy, ended up as the representative to the Anglo-American Hospital, an institution of great importance to the US community in Madrid, and one which required about 25% of CG's time.

Q: What did that involve?

CHEEVERS: The financial condition of the hospital was shaky. It meant monitoring the management of the hospital resources and the medical services furnished to the American and Anglophone community. The CG also played an important public relations role, as did his opposite number in the British Embassy. There were many demands on a CG's time for hospital activities.

Q: Is this the kind of job you think consular officers should have?

CHEEVERS: Yes. I thought it was a terrific opportunity, because you got to meet more than just the American business community. Really essential for a Consular officer.

Q: How big a section was the consular section?

CHEEVERS: It was the largest section I had served in up to the time. There were seven officers including the consul general, and about 22 FSNs.

Q: Was this the biggest experiences as a manager.

CHEEVERS: Up until that time.

Q: What particular things do you want to tell us about managing such a section?

CHEEVERS: There were a number of things which were really new to me. Serving in the Third World, you had to work around the “frailties” or lack of experience of your FSNs. In Spain, you had highly qualified FSNs with great dedication. We recruited those people in the 1950s. We'll never do as well again, because Spain's economy was small at the time, and even top-quality people couldn't find jobs. We therefore got the best. What I'm saying is that we had some superb FSNs. There were problems of course, probably because of the nature of the people. They're a very proud people, but volatile. You had to sensitize yourself to a number of things, but it was worth the effort.

Q: They were so qualified, didn't they certainly know far more than those “stupid vice consuls” that are brand-new?

CHEEVERS: They certainly did. One of the problems there was how to educate the vice consuls.

Q: How did you do that?

CHEEVERS: You sat them down often individually. You also met with them as a group, have meetings, for example. There were not only meetings of the officers; you had to have meetings with the top or upper level FSNs, so that they would have an opportunity for talk and interplay. I was not always successful in educating some of our officers. Few believed that a non American, non officer knew more than they did.

Q: Was this an ego problem of a young person?

CHEEVERS: Oh, sure. All young officers are setting the world on fire. “I'm a Foreign Service officer, and I'm going to do it my way.” Perfectly natural, and perfectly amusing to watch as reality sets in.

Q: Some of these, I presume, were rotational officers that maybe resented being in the consular job?

CHEEVERS: No doubt about it.

Q: How did you handle that? This tape doesn't reveal the smirk on your face.

CHEEVERS: Not easily and not always well. The educational process is a long one. It's frustrating! Sometimes you're successful and sometimes you are not.

Q: Practically speaking, can you think of some examples of how you “did in” one of these arrogant little vice consuls, how you taught him?

CHEEVERS: I would make sure that when they went off on their first prison visit or they went off to a hospital visit, that they had one of the FSNs with them. There were two reasons for this. There was the experience situation, and there was the question of language. Many of them coming out of FSI knew their Spanish but hadn't practiced it in real life consular situations. In a lot of cases, they came away saying, “I wouldn't have been able to accomplish anything had it not been for Maria Jos#, because Maria Jos# (the FSN) explained to me what was really going on.”

We had several FSN experts. We had an extradition expert who doubled as a secretary, plus we had an arrest expert, who knew the penal code and judicial systems inside and out. Officers relied on these experienced staff members and mutual respect grew out of shared experiences, in most cases.

In other cases, a minority, no matter what you did, you could not educate them.

Q: From the non-FSN position, how else did you train these junior officers to grow up, if you will?

CHEEVERS: By giving them as much responsibility as they could handle. I never, at any time that I can recall, said, “I'll do that.” We had brief meetings in the morning, and I'd say, “Look, this is what has to be done today. You, John, I'd like you to take a look at this, and I'd like you to call or visit the police station to check on such and such a case and report the outcome to me. They were always doing busy, and they always had and examine what they did later on, because they'd have to answer to me. We had no problem with that.

Q: One of the classic examples of the junior officer that made the visa decision, for example, the boss tries to convince the junior officer that really, that's not the way to go after an intervention or whatever. How did you work with the junior officer?

CHEEVERS: Not easy. Not easy.

Q: Did you just overrule them and take the case away?

CHEEVERS: No. I never had to do that. I believe that if you worked long and hard at it, sooner or later they were persuaded; they would come around.

Q: Can you give an example of how they come around? What do you do to them, other than pull your rank on them?

CHEEVERS: I hope that I never did this. Although age and experience do exert subtle influence. That never happened in Spain, but allow me to jump to my Paris assignment and tell you that at one particular time, we had a Haitian case, an official of his government, seemed to be the worst and most unqualified individual I'd ever come across. I said “that's a pretty bad case. If I were doing that adjudicating, I wouldn't have issue.” And then we would go down the line on citing various scenarios, what the regulations said,

what the attorney concerned was trying to do. It was an educational process for a new officer, and very time consuming.

Q: So what you're saying is, you really try and walk through the particular elements of a case, and hopefully as a learning process, the vice consul will come to the same decision.

CHEEVERS: It took time and patience. Unfortunately, in Paris we didn't have an awful lot of time, as you very well know. There wasn't a lot of time for the explanations, but I don't recall having to go through such exercises in visa cases more than once with the some officer, except one, but that's another story.

Q: Before we come to Paris, one other question on Spain, especially in the position you were in, far more responsible and certainly more involved with the total management of the mission. Do you have any new lessons that you learned in your role with the rest of the embassy? Anything that you did differently as a result of Spain, with your colleagues, with the DCM, with the ambassador?

CHEEVERS: I can't think of that offhand.

Q: You had little problems, then, with them, with your peers and with your bosses?

CHEEVERS: No, I didn't have any problems with my peers, I must say.

Q: They understood the consular function?

CHEEVERS: As much as you can expect that.

Q: What do you mean by that? Are they dumb?

CHEEVERS: No, they are not dumb, but they are not generally interested in the consular function. That is a reality. They're not as interested as they are in the—the admin function.

That function suffers the same blight, in my opinion: “Non-substantive” and consequently, not to be reckoned with unless problems come up.

Q: But they've got money and you don't.

CHEEVERS: True. As far as the admin people were concerned, you made friends with admin people right away, even if you don't like them, because their function affected your well being in such areas as housing, school allowances or how quickly they responded when your air freight got lost.

Q: Because they wouldn't pay your bill.

CHEEVERS: Correct. You wouldn't always get a sympathetic hearing when you needed resources, such as positions which were needed or had to be filled.

Q: What are some of the devices you used in Spain, though, to get your colleagues and your bosses to understand more what the consular function meant substantively?

CHEEVERS: I never stopped talking or explaining. I risked being a bore, but I guess I ploughed on, and crucial relationships remain in tact.

Q: What kind of talking did you do?

CHEEVERS: Explaining to those concerned how things really worked, and how they wouldn't if resources were not forthcoming.

Q: Do you think this helped? Can you look back and say, “Yes, I'm glad I did it that way”?

CHEEVERS: Yes. However, I'm glad I did it that way, but still feel it could have been better. I can tell you that all the time I was there, we had shortfalls in personnel. I don't know of any consular section worthy of the name that doesn't have resource problems at some time or other. The famous consular package, as you very well know. I was in

the consular function before the package became a management tool. God knows how resources were obtained before that.

Q: Tell us, for those who might not, in hearing this tape, know, what was the consular package, and why wasn't there one before?

CHEEVERS: I don't know why there wasn't one before. My presumption is that when people in Paris, for example, needed an additional slot, they picked up a telephone to the bureau and said, “I need another vice consul here.”

Q: And they either got it or didn't get it.

CHEEVERS: They got it or didn't get it. Sometimes it was persuasion, threats, or personal relationships.

Q: What was the consular package?

CHEEVERS: The consular package, for the first time, pulled together all of the consular statistics, to inform the Department what services were performed. It addressed volume and man hours and also projected needs for the future based on trends or other local changes affecting the function. So it became a managing tool, one of the great management tools in the Foreign Service.

Q: It's the leading one.

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: Tell me, was this happening, then, coincidentally with what you were describing before, when you were back in Washington and someone in the Secretarial called and said, “Shake yourself up”? This was all part of it?

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: Was this Barbara Watson that did this?

CHEEVERS: Yes. Why didn't we know we only had one officer for 600 incarcerated Americans? We had no single document to look at what we were doing and what resources it took to do it.

Q: Of course, there were things going out in society, in general. The Harvard Business School and so on was creating new quantifiable computers coming along, and maybe we were finally catching on.

CHEEVERS: As a matter of fact, CA was able to tap into that for a long time. I don't know if that's true now, but at the time we were on the cutting edge of some of that new technology for exactly that reason, to quantify services.

Q: You're saying that the consular package was, indeed, a good thing, and you continue to feel that through the years?

CHEEVERS: Yes, indeed, and since its genesis it's been greatly refined.

Q: Let's jump to Paris, where you and I worked together. I don't know where to start with that. What new lessons did you pick up in Paris?

CHEEVERS: How to work among the French. (Smiling)

Q: Were they any different from the Spanish?

CHEEVERS: Oh, yes, of course.

Q: What was the principal difference?

CHEEVERS: Well, they were easily irritated and individualistic. You had to spend a lot of time separating them, I found, in the very beginning. I had a lot of—I shouldn't say

problem, per se, but a lot of concerns with the management of the FSNs, because they were uneven.

Q: So you didn't have the same type of qualified FSNs?

CHEEVERS: I had some very good ones, but I didn't have the same across the board quality as in Madrid.

Q: How big was the visa section?

CHEEVERS: Let me see now. I think we had five offices all told, and about 13 to 17 FSNs.

Q: Did you restrict yourself completely to the visa function, then?

CHEEVERS: Yes, that was the Office of Visa Services, which was in a separate building when I got there. Paris was not yet considered a Visa Mill.

Q: Did you feel separated?

CHEEVERS: Very much so. There is no splendor in isolation.

Q: You were in a different annex, the famous Talleyrand.

CHEEVERS: Yes. We were two and half blocks or so away from the embassy, and it definitely did foster the feeling of isolation.

Q: We were in the midst of talking about the consular section in Paris, and specifically the visa section, which you headed, which was separate from the embassy, in a separate building called the Talleyrand. How did that separation affect your role with both the section and the rest of the embassy?

CHEEVERS: Very profoundly, I think. You were two and a half blocks away. You didn't eat in the embassy cafeteria where everybody else did, because you didn't have time,

away from this. It was very difficult for your officers to run over and take a look at classified material or meet other Embassy colleagues casually. If you had to get something done at the Embassy, you had to walk across Place de la Concorde. The physical distance translated into other kinds of distances. You felt separate and apart.

Q: You felt separate. You were physically separate. But what was done to make you feel part of the mission?

CHEEVERS: In the beginning, not an awful lot. But subsequently, as you very well know, we did pull the whole consular section together in one place in the embassy auditorium, and that, for a while, cured that. The consular section is all in one place again, but they are again on the other side of the Place de la Concorde, separate from the Embassy.

Q: So what you're saying is that you were not only what some consular sections suffer from, being separate from the regular mission, but you were even separate from your own section.

CHEEVERS: That's right. I will tell you that I am a consistent believer in keeping the consular section where it should be, and that is as part of the chancery.

Q: As you know, you and I feel 100% together on that, but there are arguments against it which are security questions.

CHEEVERS: I am aware of the arguments which have come up since. There's no doubt that security is a problem. But I think it is also very curable, and I've seen places where it is. I've inspected for two years, and I've seen places who have the security situation taken care of very well, thank you, and it did not impede the functions or endanger the chancery. There are ways to manage the flow of people so that the chancery did its function and personnel are secure.

Q: I know it wouldn't be fair for me to ask you to speak for me, but since you and I have discussed this so many times in Paris, what are the arguments that you think are most important that you can give to your bosses of why it is important to have the mission together?

CHEEVERS: You have some problems with young consular officers, who feel that just by being consular officers, they're not like other embassy officers. Separating them or moving them away physically from the embassy underscores that feeling, that kind of uncertainty, of the value of the mission. One of the problems of separation was that many of the officers did not have opportunities, to have lunch with their opposite numbers in the political section or other embassy sections. It underscored their isolation and their feeling that they were different.

Q: What did you do about it, as their supervisor?

CHEEVERS: There really wasn't very much I could do, because there's no way you can roll up two and a half blocks as was the case in Paris, but you could hammer away at working toward integrating the consular section into the embassy and make your officers aware of your efforts. I think you recall your battle to take over the auditorium for the visa function.

Q: The auditorium, I should stop to say, is part of the main chancery, and that's where we ended up moving. Which put us right in the chancery. It did not make the ambassador happy at all, because the ambassador had a lofty and elite view of the consular function. I'll maintain that to this day. But we were there, and I think that the morale was better because we were there. They could exit out the back door of the visa section and be downstairs in the same cafeteria as their colleagues. They were part of the embassy. You are, of course, preaching the Holy Gospel to me.

CHEEVERS: Does it sound this way?

Q: What we're trying to do is really get from you your views on how you go about convincing ambassadors that have problems with the consular section.

CHEEVERS: I would allow that there are some ambassadors who are uneducable. There is nothing one can do to convince them that a chancery should house the key functions of a mission or that separate deleterious effects upon young consular officers. But there are others who are dying to be educated, who never given the consular function any thought, because consul generals have ignored the opportunities to educate.

Q: But your experience in Paris was that you, me, and others did try?

CHEEVERS: Yes, there's no doubt about it.

Q: And maybe, in part, succeeded.

CHEEVERS: Oh, yes, I would have to concede that that was true, indeed.

Q: Going back to the officers, you had quite good ones tough.

CHEEVERS: I also had some of the lame and the halt.

Q: I was going to say we have heard the cliche about Europe and Canada, that they sometimes are assigned officers they can't place anywhere else. What was your impression of some of your junior officers and other officers?

CHEEVERS: Some were junior officers in name only. They were veterans, and had gone from post to post performing poorly. It was extremely difficult to coax a performance out of them. As much as you might like to believe that there's some good in everybody and that you can get something out of an officer, I found that in one particular case, without naming names, I got so very little that the rewards were not worth the effort. There are cases of that, incurables! In other cases, I was successful, however.

Q: What do you do with an officer that, as you say, you've tried everything out on, and it just doesn't seem to work? What do you do?

CHEEVERS: Well, there are a number of classic ways you can handle that, as you very well know. You can pick up a telephone to the Dept and say, “You've got to help me get rid of Mr. X. He's destroying the morale of my section.” There are officers who do not pull their weight, and the other officers look at you and think, “What kind of a manager are you if you can't help us to get rid of somebody who's not doing his work?”

Q: So number one, talk back to the boss.

CHEEVERS: Talk back to the boss and say, “You can't let this happen. We've got to do something.” You can use the system, with its flaws and often slow response, when an officer like that wants to extend, and say, “No, I can't support your extension.” More serious are the cases where there is genuine incompetence, and the system does not respond. You are often forced to make adjustments, and work does suffer for it.

Q: How did you work this problem out with others beyond your own supervisor?

CHEEVERS: As you very well know, I did have your ear and your sympathy in one situation. I think you understood that. In that particular case, we were saved, because the officer concerned retired. Other cases were tougher to handle. In Spain, I had an officer who was a classic troublemaker who threatened a grievance at every perceived opportunity. Personnel management can be a minefield.

Q: Mr. Spiers, as Under Secretary for Management—how do you stop this problem? It seems to have been going on for years and seems to still be out there, of the officer that just is really incompetent and you can't get to leave and the system won't get rid of?

CHEEVERS: I think BEX has a problem.

Q: Board of Examiners. BEX is the acronym.

CHEEVERS: They have to take a look at things and say, “What is the successful past work record of this individual?” Not “We ought to have this individual for a variety of reasons.” Not related to competence and experience.

Q: Maybe take a person who's unsuccessful and read back into the BEX files and see where maybe a mistake was made?

CHEEVERS: Sure. That is one way.

Q: Or maybe the person changed.

CHEEVERS: Some people do. I would give them the benefit of the doubt. I did come across in my inspection experience an officer who did so poorly in the beginning, it was pathetic, but it turned out the officer was in the wrong environment with the wrong supervision. Subsequent assignments provided the right mix and this officer later demonstrated great competence.

Q: Am I concluding, then, no matter what, the supervisor is still responsible for doing the most?

CHEEVERS: Yes. And I believe that problems arise in the fear of the supervisor to document things or to bite the bullet.

Q: Do you have any examples of that?

CHEEVERS: Yes, I can tell you that the officers would—and I reviewed many such examples when assigned to the grievance staff. Officers who had been problem officers for years had sterling performance records. Finally somebody would say, “This simply can't go on. This officer is not functioning.” When post Eleks were reviewed you were astonished because there was no record of performance flaws. The record and the verbal

performance assessment were poles apart. Poor performance were not documented because the supervisors are afraid to take on the problems of the system—grievances, EER [Employee Efficiency Report] complaints, disgruntled employees, intimidation, all of those kinds of things. It is very difficult. I would not say that there is no simple answer to this serious flaw in the system.

Q: So it sounds like that Paris added some management skills and experiences.

CHEEVERS: Oh, no doubt about it. What I inherited in Paris was an individual who had been everybody's problem for years and nobody had dealt with it appropriately.

Q: Including me as an inspector.

CHEEVERS: I didn't know this bit of history. But it is nice to have someone to blame.

Q: I inspected him, yes. (Laughs)

CHEEVERS: Okay, fine. But I found myself at the tail end of this officer's career, documenting everything. Drafting memos to this officer that said: “On such and such a date, I asked you to do the following and I have not yet received your response. Would you promptly advise me the status of the report I asked you for?” In normal circumstances, you collegially asked your officers: “Hey, what about that thing I asked you about?” I couldn't do that in the case mentioned. Management became labor intensive. One individual took up most of your time for the management of the section.

Q: So what you added to your career in Paris is more of an individual oriented management of those individuals and so on.

CHEEVERS: Oh, sure. I would say you can't shirk these things. You have to look ahead and say, “You know something, my friend, if you don't deal with this right now, you may inherit this problem again later on down the pike.” And you're not helping this officer. You are adding to the deterioration. There are people in the system who not only don't want

to bite the bullet, but don't know how to evaluate a performance. From the standpoint of a grievance officer, I can tell you that 60% of all the grievances are generated by the performance evaluation report.

Q: I want to make sure, because we're really working now under the Washington area, where we should be in your two jobs there before you retired. But before we leave Paris, anything else you want to tell us?

CHEEVERS: No. You're talking about incidents, very interesting things that happened, and we talked about this once before. This was during the Iranian crisis and all the different things that were going on. We had an enormous increase in the number of third country nationals, i.e., Iranians. Then we had the controversy over what country would accept the Shah.

Q: Again, this period is 1977 to 1981, so this is '79.

CHEEVERS: As you will recall, the Shah was adrift. Wandering around the world because no one would offer him asylum. I think that when Embassy Paris got involved in the matter, the Shah was either in Mexico or Morocco, I'm not altogether certain.

Q: I don't think we were.

CHEEVERS: And we may not even have known.

Q: I don't think even Mr. Kissinger knew.

CHEEVERS: Probably not.

Q: As we understand it, Mr. Kissinger felt we had an obligation to the Shah.

CHEEVERS: Very definitely. I believe that's true. In any event, we received a Department cable very, very early in the morning—or very, very late at night, depending on how you look at it—and I think I called you.

Q: You called me in Brest.

CHEEVERS: You were somewhere, and I said, “Hey, wait 'til you see this. There is a cable that says the passports of Reza Pahlavi Shah and the Shahbanou and the children along with family retainers, are on their way to Paris. The passports, are being forwarded separately, with a request for visitor visas.

Q: Is there a rule against issuing a passport to somebody when he's not in the same country?

CHEEVERS: There certainly was.

Q: And we discussed that, didn't we? (Laughs)

CHEEVERS: You took the matter up with the ambassador. The ambassador said, “It's very clear. The Department wants you to issue the visas.” That was what he said.

Q: So the ambassador was instructing you to issue the visa?

CHEEVERS: The ambassador, in effect, was saying, “The handwriting is on the wall. If you tell them you can't do it, you better have some darn good reasons.”

Q: You were intimidated by the DCM in Rabat. How did you do with this one?

CHEEVERS: He was quite correct. We had been told, in effect, “They're on their way. Now let's wait and see what happens.” Luckily for us, waiting to see what happened, did not take long. A very short time thereafter the Department advised Paris that the shah had

found asylum elsewhere. The issue evaporated; we did not have to do something that would have created serious problems personally and politically.

Q: This instruction came from the highest levels of the Department?

CHEEVERS: No, not that high, but I'm not really sure of this.

Q: Did Barbara Watson, do you think, know about it?

CHEEVERS: That's hard to say. It would not surprise me that she didn't.

Q: My recollection is that she didn't know about it, which raises the question of who can give the ultimate order in visa issuance.

CHEEVERS: The Secretary. If you are talking of the last analysis.

Q: I didn't think so. Technically you are correct, but I am not aware of any case in which a consular officer has successfully challenged the Department when it had been determined that the issuance of a visa was in the US interests.

CHEEVERS: Yes, the Secretary.

Q: You and I didn't always agree on everything.

CHEEVERS: No, we didn't agree on that, and as I say, we are a little better educated about things right now, I think. It didn't enter my mind at that time that the Dept could have shifted responsibility to the Attorney General with the waiver authority.

Mr. Kennedy: Is there an ultimate order?

Q: There's an ultimate decision. There's the ultimate decision of whether the visa is issued or not, and the consular officer issues the visa.

CHEEVERS: That's quite true. You can be persuaded. The ultimate comes from the Secretary. If the Secretary says, “Do it,” which he probably wouldn't if he had L's advice, you would have a hard time defying it.

Q: When you walked out of the ambassador's office, were you operating under marching orders that you were to do it?

CHEEVERS: Yes and no.

Q: God, that sounds like a wishy-washy consular officer! (Laughs)

CHEEVERS: I probably said, “Okay, fine. You can't make a decision on a visa until an application and travel documents are presented. . .”

Q: Then you went and said a novena.

CHEEVERS: No. No, but I should have.

Q: You didn't call me, because I was on the plane coming home.

CHEEVERS: I'm not sure whether I even checked my memory against regulations looked to see whether or not presence of an applicant in the consul district was still a requirement.

Q: You did indeed.

CHEEVERS: . . . before or after I saw the ambassador. I wasn't sure when I did that.

Q: I think also we had agreed that it would be proper to inform Barbara Watson of the action we were about to take.

CHEEVERS: Yes. Your memory is better than mine on that.

Q: What we're talking about here, obviously, is an example of the consular officers being under pressure and being told for political or whatever reasons that a decision had to go a certain way in which the officer did not feel that was the right decision, not ethically or even practically, but in this case, legally.

CHEEVERS: Legally, yes. However, if you took a look at that, the way that cable was written, I don't have any recollection that it ordered us to issue that visa, but it was implicit that passports were going to be presented. Some subtlety.

Q: My real question is, do you think there are times when the US national interests causes us to do things that would be in violation of the law?

CHEEVERS: Probably. Yes, sure.

Q: Do you think the consular officer should have to figure out when those are or do you think he should pass the buck?

CHEEVERS: Well, I'll tell you something. A consular officer needs guidance in such cases. I don't think any consular officer is going to make that kind of decision all by himself. As I think about this incident now, the scenario surrounding receipt of that cable, I would have picked up the telephone saying, “Okay, fine. We're waiting. But has anybody back there thought about this, this, and this?” The fallout of a controversial decision.

Q: Has everyone done their homework.

CHEEVERS: Exactly. Because if I make such a decision, I want to have all information available to me. Barbara Watson, for example, I don't know if we asked anybody, but apparently you knew or subsequently learned that Barbara Watson was not in on it.

Q: She was not in on it.

CHEEVERS: Okay. That says something about our system, and it isn't the best, in my opinion.

Q: The press was too sensitive. Some things are so sensitive.

CHEEVERS: What we've been saying here is what we all know, that there are some things which are taken out of the realm of the consular function and decisions are not made by consular officers in such cases.

Q: Or if you put them into the realm of the consular function, the consular officer will screw it up and say no!

CHEEVERS: Well, it could happen. For political reasons, they don't want that to happen.

Q: So you whirled yourself back from this great experience in France, and then after a year in the War College, you became an inspector.

CHEEVERS: That's right.

Q: An inspector that did only consular inspection?

CHEEVERS: No, I did some admin inspections as well, and did an inspection of some small posts in Mexico by myself.

Q: Did you do substantive inspections?

CHEEVERS: Well, if you want to call Matamoros substantive, yes. (Laughs) A one-man post on the border.

Q: Were you kept from going into other functions?

CHEEVERS: No, not at all. I first went to Mexico for the inspection of the narcotics office. The Bureau of Narcotics?

Q: Yes.

CHEEVERS: We did that in Mexico, and that was not a consular function. That was the allocation of resources with the end question being, “How successful are we in Mexico with the offices and resources we have?” So it took me out of the realm of administration and the consular function.

Q: Did you feel qualified, with your experience? Because I notice you've had no “substantive” experience, but only consular.

CHEEVERS: The word “substantive” is the bane of my existence. I don't know how I could have gotten around it.

Q: How have you gotten around it?

CHEEVERS: I don't go along with that, you saying “no substantive experience.” I think the consular function is very substantive. I think it becomes more substantive all the time. We're learning—and this is sort of like being on a soapbox—we're learning right now that immigration and the drug trade are very, very substantive issues. Both are issues in this administration.

Q: Do you think our colleagues in the State Department understand this?

CHEEVERS: There are some, and there are others that do not.

Q: Looking back over your career, especially the last 20 years, have you seen a change in this attitude?

CHEEVERS: It's been uneven. I know that there are some people who have embraced the faith, if you like, and say, “You're a colleague, just like my brethren in the economic section.” And there are others who will never concede equality. But that is changing. I think that the quality of the consular officers coming in and the programming of consular officers has had a very, very salubrious effect upon that. You now have officers who have excellent linguistic skills, and who have had political or other reporting assignments behind them. When they finally get up to that level, they've done all the things that the other non-consular officers have done. It now becomes very competitive.

Q: When I jokingly said you had no substantive, obviously you and I know the substance of consular, but you had no experiences outside of consular that you could at least call upon.

CHEEVERS: Not until rather late.

Q: Not until this point in the inspection corps. In retrospect, were there ways in which you might have turned some of these assignments into different—like reporting or . . .?

CHEEVERS: I'll tell you why. When I was in Senegal, for example, that was a one-man post, with two FSNs. There was street reporting which could have been done, but the DCM at that time believed that that was the exclusive purview of political officers. When I said to him, “Look, I can do a lot of other things besides consular work and I speak French.

And he said, “Well, why don't we put you on the E and E report?” And that's as far as I got.

There is one other thing that I did get to do, and I thought was very good experience. I got to sort the cables as kind of an aide for the ambassador. I also got to take the minutes in the meetings. Small potatoes in the scheme of things, but I got to know what was going on.

Q: It was some experience.

CHEEVERS: Yes. There were some experiences like that.

Q: Do you feel you could have taken an initiative, though? This is what you said, that you asked permission. What if you hadn't asked permission, just gone out and done something, or you were exposed to something on the street and came back, and maybe with your political section chief?

CHEEVERS: Knowing what I know now, yes. Very definitely. I had an officer who worked for me in Spain who did exactly that. He was a top-flight consular officer, but he also had an extraordinary sensitivity and flair for political analysis and reporting. Things were happening very fast in Spain: the transition to democracy after 40 years of Franco. And he would go downtown into the thick of things, listen to the loudspeakers, talk to the men on the street, then come back with a report, and say, “Hey, look what I did.” Working the streets.

Q: How do you do this without aggravating or causing jealousies?

CHEEVERS: I happened to have a very good relationship with him, and I thought it was wonderful and enviable. I realized that this was an officer who was not going to stay a consular officer very long. What he was doing, in effect, was creating opportunities for himself to leave the consular cone to go into the political section, and he did, ultimately.

Q: Because he wanted to disassociate himself with it, or because he had a different . . . ?

CHEEVERS: No, I think he had another optic. He was doing well. Everything you gave him to do he did superbly, with a consular sensitivity. But he always added something. He picked out things that were happening which were outside of the consular function, which were useful to others in the embassy. Having come out of the consular section, he was very good for us. We needed friends.

Q: As a person with consular background in S/IG [Inspector General's Office], in the inspection corps, what things do you think you brought that were particularly helpful to the inspection corps as a whole?

CHEEVERS: I know when things are wrong.

Q: Do you think a consular officer knows better?

CHEEVERS: No, I don't think so. I did have some experience that other officers did not have, and that was in management. Consular officers have management experience, because in the very early stages of their career, they usually have somebody to supervise.

Q: Inspectors are basically inspecting the management of a post.

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: So how did you share this experience with your colleagues in S/IG?

CHEEVERS: There were a number of different opportunities, as you very well know, depending on the style of the inspector, such as saying, “This is what I've done. Or this is what they're doing at post X that is effective and innovative. When we performed this particular service in Paris, this is how we handled it.”

Q: So you would come up with examples of your own.

CHEEVERS: Yes, in which resources were better used elsewhere than at the post we were then inspecting.

Q: Can you think of a practical example of when you were inspecting?

CHEEVERS: You came across the nickel and dime stuff all the time. Employees didn't use the resources that they had, such as word processors. Elementary problems that wasted

resources. For example, an FSN in a post we looked at, had one of those marvelous green books—you know, visas in, visas out. Entries took man hours that the post could not afford, and yet they had a Wang which could have been used for their low volume wordbank. They had another system, but it was a backup, because the Wang went down from time to time. You had to say, “Look, that doesn't really matter. How many times does Wang go down? How many people are going to come up as a hit on those machines?”

Q: I jumped over S/IG, because I guess it sort of followed to the inspection corps. I jumped over your first non-consular assignment in a few years in the grievance. How did you end up as a grievance officer, and what does the grievance staff do?

CHEEVERS: This really has more to do with my personal needs and wants and how the personnel system works. After the Department had invested in me in the War College, I was scheduled to go to a large visa section somewhere, and they were talking to me about Manila, Buenos Aires, Mexico City. For personal reasons none of those places have worked out for me.

Q: After just one year in the United States?

CHEEVERS: I should have had a regular tour, yes. However, I was unfortunate, in a sense, that there were no jobs open either in VO or on the desks or any other place that I could see, that I wanted, or that wanted me. I had some very strong personal reasons for a Washington assignment. I had a child in high school at that time and did not want to move him. Consequently, when they offered me—I think it was BA or Bogota, I said, “I don't think I can take it.”

Q: But what I'm hearing is that as a consular officer, you're being pushed back overseas.

CHEEVERS: Oh, sure.

Q: When normally you would expect a four-year domestic assignment, and should have one. You only had one other in your career.

CHEEVERS: It was the needs of the service which obtained. They need a consular officer in BA.

Q: Couldn't you fight it? I mean, you obviously did.

CHEEVERS: I did, and won.

Q: And you won.

CHEEVERS: I was told, “If you take BA, this will mean a promotion for you.”

Q: I didn't know that's the way promotions were made.

CHEEVERS: Well, it was a high-profile job Consul General's job and would have given me additional management experience in a post besought with problems such as the fraud.

Q: Do you believe all that?

CHEEVERS: Yes, I do. Sure, I believe that the promotions follow the jobs. No doubt about it, but I did not need BA at that juncture.

Q: I thought they followed your performance in the job.

CHEEVERS: Well, that's a given. Good performance in a good job, but a poor job no matter how well you do, doesn't really help. You need that high profile job. You can work your tail off in a place like Brisbane, but you're not going to make a promotion, because nobody's looking at Brisbane, and the job is simply not an important one.

Q: Just stopping for a moment and looking back very quickly, do you feel your entire career, as you were promoted, was a result of having the right job?

CHEEVERS: Yes, I think so. I'm sure that Spain being the focal point of US attention during the Franco/Gonzales transition and being in the newspapers, often a lot to do with it. The heavy protection workload also served to make it an important job.

Q: Acting consul general probably helped, too, didn't it?

CHEEVERS: It helped a lot, and plus the largest civil aviation crash in history took place when I was there.

Q: Made the good examples in the OER.

CHEEVERS: But you don't do any of it without a performance. That's a given. You cannot flub, you cannot fall.

Q: And an articulate supervisor.

CHEEVERS: Yes, absolutely.

Q: Now, tell me, Joe, back to you getting your domestic assignment extended properly, you went to the grievance staff. What was your feeling about that as a job?

CHEEVERS: I'll tell you, I wanted to stay in Washington, so it was really a question of beggars not being choosers. I was not going to BA and I was not going to any of the other places proffered.

Q: What does the grievance staff do?

CHEEVERS: The grievance staff tries to rectify the problems of management. Management and the employees are at loggerheads more often than you think. The

staff tries to settle most grievances. It's an appendage which can make the management system work better. You also have got to have somebody to tell your problems to. We all know that in the Foreign Service, up until a relatively recent time, '71, I think it was, we did not have a grievance procedure. If you didn't like the way you were being treated by your supervisor, or the system, there was no vehicle for redress. You were not promoted because your boss simply had a personal dislike for you, very often said anything he wanted about you regardless of accuracy, and you had no opportunity to look at the written evaluation. There's been a great evolution in the system of evaluation of performances, I'm a great believer in a grievance procedure, if not abused.

Q: Without obviously citing any examples, because we can't, but you can generalize on it, was your impression from your service there of two years that it not only is a needed service, but it's effective?

CHEEVERS: It is effective, yes, but it's uneven. I keep using the word “uneven.” Management should go to the core of the problem, to educating the supervisors in the writing and preparation of performance evaluations.

Q: Were most of the grievances based on efficiency reports?

CHEEVERS: Sixty percent. Three years afterwards, I returned to the grievance for a 3 month TDY. The percentages were the same. The same problems were generating grievances. Worse than that, little was being done about it. Many of the grievants who were grievants when I was assigned to PER/G were grieving again and again.

Q: Because you were exposed to, in a sense, the weakest part of our system, what did you learn from your tour there about our system, especially as it relates to the consular function?

CHEEVERS: I remember talking to Joan Clark, referring to PER/G then the Director General, as the “underside of the Department.” She was not amused.

Q: Maybe her sense of humor is different than yours and perhaps mine.

CHEEVERS: (Laughs) Very different. In any event, yes, I did learn some things. I also wished I had this experience earlier, because if you want to see how a system works, see where the mistakes occur.

Q: I won't go off the record here and tell Joe that when we were together in Paris, I kept saying, "Joe, you've got to know how the system works! You don't know how the system works." (Laughs)

CHEEVERS: I wish I had it . . .

Q: Ten years, yes.

CHEEVERS: Yes. It really was a revelation.

Q: We've got to know how the system works.

CHEEVERS: We've really got to know how it works and how it does not work, and that's what I learned.

Q: So your basic lesson out of your tour there was the underbelly of the system. But how about the good things? Did you have a sense, a taste of righteousness coming forward?

CHEEVERS: Yes. On occasion, yes. I would see things which were patently incorrect and unfair and violations of the system, and of published rules and regulations, and the grievance would be settled, or won at staff or board level.

Q: There are those who say, "All you've got to do is grieve and you'll win any argument," that the system immediately folds.

CHEEVERS: I don't believe that. I believe that there are people who will attempt to wear down the system, and I encountered an employee who had 17 different grievances in a six-year career. I find that very difficult to believe this officer would have any credibility. However, remember something. You have a grievance staff which is a management appendage, and allegedly autonomous, but let us not kid ourselves here. Then you have the grievance board.

Q: Which is independent.

CHEEVERS: Which is very independent. Their decisions are binding, and they play hardball.

Q: Going back to one of your first examples in our interview of Rabat, there is a word, I think, "intimidation" used, which is a perfectly good word. Did you feel intimidated at times in your decision making, your analysis on the grievance staff?

CHEEVERS: No, I did not.

Q: Never under any pressure?

CHEEVERS: Oh, yes, we were under pressure. I'll tell you where the pressure came from. The pressure came from the attorneys for the grievants.

Q: Oh, yes. But I meant from the system, from the bosses.

CHEEVERS: No.

Q: The bosses never pressed?

CHEEVERS: The confidentiality of the system precluded this in individual grievances of the performance record. However, general assessment was that the Department continued to be intimidated by attorneys. When attorneys came and there were threats of

class actions and the threats of spilling to the press, we became very frightened. I hasten to add I was not proud.

Q: Those are the outside lawyers. Don't we have our inside lawyers that are there to defend us?

CHEEVERS: Yes, we do, but I also believe the level of competence in house is not as great as it could be. I've seen outside lawyers whom I always thought should have been our advocates, but that is a very personal opinion. But there were moments when I had strong feelings, telling myself, “This particular grievance is absolutely without merit, but the grievant has got one smart lawyer.” And that lawyer is shrewder than I am, and smarter than any of our lawyers.

Q: This leads me to the obvious question. As a consular officer—and I say the obvious question because we dealt with lawyers that were competent in consular work . . .

CHEEVERS: And not so competent.

Q: And not so competent. Who knew how to do their best for their client. What do you feel your consular experience has brought to the grievance staff?

CHEEVERS: Let me tell you something. Nobody likes every lawyer he meets, but you must learn to work with them. Sometimes it is very distasteful.

Q: And you had learned that from the consular function.

CHEEVERS: Yes.

Q: What else did you bring as a skill?

CHEEVERS: You bring a lot of patience to it, I think, because you're dealing with human foibles. It may not be a skill, but if you don't have it, it may not matter what other skills you do possess.

Q: Do you think consular officers are patient?

CHEEVERS: I think they must be. They may have more patience than other officers. There are many occasions where compassion is also part of a solution. You have to separate out the emotionalism and get to the facts. That you do as a consular officer all the time.

Q: This all leads to one of the hardest things of the consular functions, the decision making. It usually ends up that you've got to make a decision.

CHEEVERS: More often than any other officer in the embassy.

Q: How did you do that in the grievance staff?

CHEEVERS: The grievance staff is a much more laborious situation, when a grievance is received, it is immediately analyzed. Facts are gathered and it is then written up, if it cannot be settled.

Q: To make a decision, though?

CHEEVERS: To make a recommendation that either a grievance has merit or not, and to agree on the remedy.

Q: That is the decision.

CHEEVERS: Yes. You make that recommendation and then you work on whether the remedy requested is equitable or appropriate. That is accomplished in discussions with the office Director, after it has been examined by L.

Q: I look back at this chronology, and I see what, to many, would be very disheartening, discouraging work in grievances. That's the negative, that's the underbelly. I see inspectors that learn terrible sad things. I see about informing all these people of deaths in their family. It sounds to me like it's not a very happy work, consular work.

CHEEVERS: Oh, that's not true.

Q: Tell me a funny story.

CHEEVERS: Everybody needs a funny story. If you can believe it, in working in deaths and estates, there were some very funny stories, but they were moments that would be referred to, as gallows humor. That was one way of dealing with a very difficult job. It was very difficult to deal with the senseless deaths of 120 people on an aircraft accident, and yet find the strength and equilibrium to continue to live your own life unaffected. What I'm probably saying is, I'm glad it's over, and how ever did I get through it?

Q: As you look back in your whole career, was it fun? Did you get more fun out it?

CHEEVERS: I would say that I would not have lasted a minute had I not been able to figure out that I was getting what I needed out of the various jobs I held. There were many days of good feelings and a sense of accomplishment.

Q: What turned you on the most? What gave you the best feeling?

CHEEVERS: In think in consular work, you have the human contact, which I happen to thrive on. Secondly, you could usually follow things from beginning to end, and you could see what you accomplished a heck of a lot easier, whether it was solving a particular problem, or just looking at the volume of services.

Q: So did you win more or lose more?

CHEEVERS: I like to believe I won more. But don't allow me to analyze and elaborate further. However, I will say that I made a personal decision when I decided to stay in Washington. So I really have no complaints as far as the Department is concerned. I also had two wonderful posts. Madrid and Paris, back to back. Unheard of, really.

Q: But you also had two good Washington ones at the end, I think, from what you've described.

CHEEVERS: I'm not saying it from that standpoint. I'm talking about it from the standpoint of career. I believe I could have done better made other promotions had I followed personnel's recommendation that or accept another overseas assignment.

Q: But it was the wrong decision. They should have kept you in Washington.

CHEEVERS: It was the right decision for them, but the wrong decision for me, and I stayed in Washington. I think I did very well, thank you. I am not an unhappy man.

Q: Joe, do you have anything more before we end this?

CHEEVERS: No, except that I would say that it was more fun than anything else. I can still look back at that with great warmth and great feeling for a job that was well done. I did my best.

Q: It's the only way, and you kept me laughing.

CHEEVERS: I had a lot of giggles out of that one, too. (Laughs)

End of interview